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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KMDR](#) [VT](#) [AE](#)
SUBJECT: POPE'S REMARKS ON ISLAM CONTINUE TO GENERATE
FRUSTRATION

REF: A) ABU DHABI 3702 (media reaction)

B) ABU DHABI 3687 (Pope remarks)

C) ABU DHABI 3617 (9-11 commemoration)

Classified by Ambassador Michele Sison, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) As Pope Benedict XVI's remarks on Islam continue to create a stir in the local press, PolChief attended the evening majlis of Presidential Religious Advisor Ali Al-Hashemi on September 18 and faced a barrage of questions about the Pope's intent and western misunderstanding of Islam. One attendee cited western "campaigns" to discredit Islam. Al-Hashemi, whose remarks at the Embassy's September 11 commemoration (ref C) focused on tolerance and unity among mankind, stressed that Islam was a peaceful faith with no ill intent to non-Muslims. He gave an eloquent speech to about 25 gathered guests on the merits of understanding and tolerance. He cited the good treatment of Muslim prisoners in U.S. prisons prior to September 11, 2001, implying that things had changed since events of that fateful day. The troublesome comments of the Pope simply reinforced for Al-Hashemi and his guests the serious lack of understanding in the west for Islam. Guests called for an explanation more than an apology, convinced that a proper reading of history would verify Islam's peaceful nature and discredit those who offered the quotes cited by the Pope in his September 12 speech.

¶2. (C) Joining the discussion later in the evening, local cleric Ali Al Jufri asked pointedly whether the Pope feared that Christianity might become a minority religion in Europe. He surmised that the Pope was trying to stem the growth of Islam. Others lamented the "weak voice" of Muslims in the western political scene, stating that the number of Jews in Britain, for example, was much smaller than the number of Muslims but that the smaller minority had the larger political voice. They made similar complaints about political dynamics in the U.S. PolChief's attempts to move the dialogue in a more productive direction seemed to fall on deaf ears, as participants, in very cordial yet determined terms, cited historical evidence of Islam's good intentions and the west's lack of sensitivity. A statement was circulated bearing the name of the "council of scholars," which condemned the Pope's selection of a "malicious" historian to cite in his remarks in Germany, and went so far as to suggest that references to Islam as being spread by the sword constituted a "new terrorism" against Islam and Muslims.

¶3. (SBU) As the Pope's remarks continue to resonate negatively in the local press and private discourse, the English daily Al-Khaleej is echoing the call of cleric Youssef Al-Qaradawi in Qatar for a "sit in" at Friday mosque services to protest the Pope's remarks. (See ref A for media reaction.)

¶4. (C) In a meeting on unrelated topics September 19, MFA Director of Asian and African Affairs Ambassador Ahmed Abdulla Al-Musally commented to PolChief that the Pope's remarks needlessly gave ammunition to Al Qa'eda and other extremist groups, helping them recruit impressionable young Muslims to their cause. He lamented that "each time things seem to be stabilizing, something happens to take us back to square one."

¶5. (C) Comment: Reactions to the Danish cartoons earlier this year resulted in peaceful boycotts, but no violence in the UAE, where public demonstrations remain tightly controlled. As the Vatican offers no products to "boycott," Public frustration over the Pope's comments will likely continue to be characterized by personal angst and ongoing press coverage of the debate. In the somewhat closed circle of dialogue in which local groups operate, it is difficult to see a Papal statement calming the furor short of what the Muslim population might consider an outright apology and convincing explanation of the remarks ("convincing" being defined, of course, in terms not familiar to the Vatican). End comment.
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